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ABSTRACT

This issue of the NCEDL Spotlight Series newsletter presents findings of a nationwide survey of state policies and definitions related to school readiness. Findings indicated that efforts to minimize the misuse of readiness assessment tools may have had some impact at the state level, with respondents showing an increased awareness of recommended early childhood assessment practices. Age was the criterion used most to determine eligibility for kindergarten. No state reported having an official statewide definition of school readiness, although five states had frameworks or benchmarks to describe readiness. Six states reported that states should emphasize schools being ready for children. Thirteen states conduct statewide screening at kindergarten entry. Twenty-six states do not mandate readiness assessments, but local districts may choose to assess children prior to or at kindergarten entry. Twelve states use assessment data for instructional purposes, with 7 using data to identify high-need schools. Most states lack statewide readiness assessments for children with special needs. Many states are developing readiness assessment systems to profile the condition of children at school entry or to design classroom activities. The newsletter notes that two fundamental issues have been largely unaddressed by states: (1) the importance of schools being ready for children; and (2) the role of the local district. The newsletter concludes with implications of the study for research and for policymakers. (KB)

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NCEDL Spotlights

No. 26 September 2000

State Policies on Readiness Surveyed

This Spotlight is based on "Readiness for School: A survey of state policies and definitions" by Gitanjali Saluja and Richard Clifford of NCEDL and Catherine Scott-Little of SERVE. The article is in press for the on-line journal Early Childhood Research and Practice. *<http://ecrp.uiuc.edu/>*

States moving toward appropriate assessment of readiness

Based on a survey of early childhood state representatives in all 50 states, data indicate that efforts to minimize the misuse of readiness assessment tools may have had some impact at the state level. Respondents seemed to indicate an increased awareness of recommended early childhood assessment practices.

Results indicate that as of January 2000:

- Age was the criteria most used to determine eligibility for kindergarten.
- No state had an official statewide definition of school readiness.
- Several states were studying the issue of school readiness.
- Local school districts were often making decisions about how children should be assessed and how data on children should be used.

A number of states reported that local districts continued to use standardized testing with young children. A number of states mandated formal screenings for every child to meet the federal IDEA requirements for a plan to identify children with disabilities. Many reported efforts to clarify the difference between readiness testing and screening, and how screening results should be used.

Other key survey findings

- No state has a formal, statewide definition of readiness for school.
- Five states say that local districts may have formal definitions for school readiness. Five states report they have frameworks or benchmarks to describe readiness.
- Six states say they believe states should place emphasis on schools being ready for all children.
- Thirteen states say they conduct statewide screening

Readiness assessment should

- Benefit children and the adults who work with children
- Be used for the purposes for which they are designed
- Be valid and reliable
- Be age-appropriate, using naturalistic observations to collect information as children interact in "real life" situations
- Be holistic, collecting information on all developmental domains (physical, social, emotional and cognitive)
- Be linguistically and culturally appropriate
- Collect information through a variety of processes and multiple sources (collection of children's work, observations of children, interviews with children, parent reports, etc.)
- Be used to guide instruction and not to determine children's placement in school

The above are from a 2000 position statement by the National Association of Early Childhood Specialists in State Departments of Education. The National Education Goals Panel has endorsed the following: **"Ready schools should have strong leadership, strive for continuity between early care and education programs, promote smooth transitions between home and school, be committed to the success of *every* child as well as every teacher and adult who interacts with children at school, use approaches that have been shown to raise children's achievement and then alter practices and programs if they do not benefit children."**

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when children enter kindergarten. Twenty-six say they do not mandate readiness assessments, but local districts may chose to assess children prior to, or as they enter, kindergarten.

- Twelve states say they use data collected on children prior to kindergarten for instructional purposes. Seven say the data help identify high-need schools and improve outcome and services for children in families in need.
- Most states do not have statewide readiness assessments in place for children with special needs.

Discussion and conclusions

Rather than using readiness assessment for placement decisions, many states are developing readiness assessment systems to profile the condition of children as they enter school or to design classroom activities to better meet the needs of children.

Many respondents articulated the difference between "screening" and "readiness assessment." Many indicated that statewide assessments are not used to make decisions about individual children's placement, but that they are used to guide instruction in the classroom and/or for accountability purpose s.

While the work that many states have done in the area of school readiness is significant, two fundamental issues have been largely unaddressed:

- **The importance of schools being ready for all children.** While several survey respondents indicated that their state emphasizes the importance of schools being ready for all children, only one state reported efforts to incorporate assessment of schools into their school readiness assessment system. Yet, school readiness can play a critical role in explaining children's performance in later grades. To gain a true assessment of school readiness, data must be collected on both children and schools.
- **The role of the local district is the second issue that warrants consideration.** Many respondents indicated that local districts have a great deal of latitude in (1) how children are assessed when they enter school and (2) how data from these assessments are used. Data on how local districts are assessing children are scarce. These assessment strategies are likely to vary in quality. Some may use standardized assessment strategies, while others may use instruments that are locally developed and have not been tested for validity and reliability. It is impossible to determine this without further research.

Implications for research, policy makers

- Results from this survey indicate a need for education on principles of early childhood assessment and for additional research.
- Efforts need to be made to inform policy makers and educators on recommended assessment strategies and how the data from the assessments should be used.
- Research on early childhood assessment must be translated into a format that can be used by policy makers as they design readiness assessment systems.
- Safeguards such as random sampling must be built into assessment systems to ensure that (1) assessments provide valid information and (2) the information is used in a manner consistent with good early childhood practice.
- Further study is needed to determine how local districts approach readiness assessment and how they are using the data.

If you want to know more:

Saluja, G., Scott-Little, C., Clifford, R.M. (in press). Readiness for School: A Survey of State Policies and Definitions. *Early Childhood Research and Practice.*

Kagan, Sharon L. (1999). Cracking the Readiness Mystique. *Young Children, 54*(5). 2–3.

Meisels, Samuel J. (1999). Assessing readiness. In Pianta, Robert C. & Cox, Martha J. (Eds.) *The Transition to Kindergarten.* Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes.

National Association of Early Childhood Specialists in State Departments of Education. (2000). *Still! Unacceptable trends in kindergarten entry and placement.* <http://ericps.crc.uiuc.edu/naecs/position/trends2000.html>

National Education Goals Panel (1991). *The Goal 1 Technical Planning Subgroup report on school readiness.* Washington, D.C.

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